

Making “Collaboration” Collaborative

An Examination of Perspectives that Frame Field Research

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Though increasingly hailed as a best practice for linguistic field research, the notion of “collaboration” is rarely defined and what it entails is based on sociocultural, legal, practical, and other contexts. This paper examines common definitions of collaboration, particularly as they pertain to research on endangered languages, and advocates a paradigm shift in the way research is approached. We argue that the notion of what constitutes “true collaboration” necessitates a collaborative approach in the very first stage of defining research roles. We illustrate this approach through the specific question of determining speakerhood for linguistic fieldwork purposes.

Guide to Paper:

Basic statement of problem: In Linguistics and in related fields, collaboration in field research has become both a norm for practice as well as an idealized goal for ethical and successful research. However, in practice, “collaboration” is multifaceted and fluctuates based on the field of research, the people involved, and their particular communities of practice. Not examining what the field and other players in the research process means by “collaboration” is both negligent and can lead to feelings of patronization. This paper provides:

- An overview of the notion of collaboration in Linguistics and other disciplines
- A description of the importance and conflicting notions of “collaboration” in various discourses
- Putting collaboration into practice in the earliest stages of research
 - Introduction to “Collaborative Consultation” within the Empowerment Model of Research (following Cameron *et al.*, 1993; Yamada, 2007)
 - A case study of what collaboration entails in two different Native American communities for determining speakerhood
- Implications for best practices in field research

§1 – On “Collaboration”

1.1 “Collaboration” is Important

- “It has become apparent that there is too much for a linguist alone to achieve and that language documentation requires collaboration” (ICLDC 2009 call for papers).
- The American Anthropological Association 107th Annual Meeting (November, 2008) had the theme of “Inclusion, Collaboration and Engagement”.

- There is an increasing amount of scholarship on the issue in a variety of fields, including Linguistics (e.g., Dwyer, 2006), Anthropology (e.g., Stull & Schensul, 1987; Evers & Toelken, 2001), Speech Communication (e.g., Thompson, 2001), Social Development (e.g., Broad & Reyes, 2008), and even Natural Resource Management (Arnold & Fernandez-Gimenez, 2007).¹
- The Belmont Report, the document that outlines basic ethical principles for human research in the United States, puts forth “Respect for persons” as one of the three basic principles for such research:

Respect for persons requires that subjects, to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them. (Belmont Report, “Application” Section, ¶2)

- Narrow Interpretation (common): Subjects are presented with the research plan and are allowed to decide to participate
- **Broad Interpretation: “Subjects” participate in formulating the research plan**

1.2 “Collaboration” Isn’t Always Collaborative

- As Rice points out, “Collaborative working arrangements are not truly collaborative if the linguist still controls the content and framework of the research, and the form in which it appears” (2006:149-150).
 - There are many discussions about developing open and respectful relationships with language consultants, though the basic design of the research is established by the researcher(s). (See, e.g., the essays in Newman & Ratliff, 2001).
- Elsewhere, there are different specific types of collaboration proposed and used, but little has been said about when the collaboration process begins.
 - In their description of the development of a web database of East Cree, Junker & Luchian (2007) describe their method of collaborative research as focusing on the research process and defining goals and methods in collaboration with their partners.
 - Mihesuah argues that “[r]esearchers who are preparing grant applications that deal with Indians should be prepared to spend months, if not a year, to allow the subjects to thoroughly understand every aspect of the study” (1993: 135). This seems to preclude collaboration in the initial stages of research.

1.3 On “Collaboration” in Various Discourses

Academic research is changing, but there is a basic view in which the researcher(s) develop the project and the roles of other parties is primarily determined by those researcher(s) ...

¹ In other academic fields, collaborative research is often called “Participatory Action Research”.

Example: The University of California, Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) Application Coversheet does not recognize, legitimize, or promote collaboration with “the community” and makes no reference to collaboration of this kind:

Figure 1. UC-Berkeley CPHS Coversheet – Portion on “Collaboration” (5/2008 Version).²

Part IV: COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS

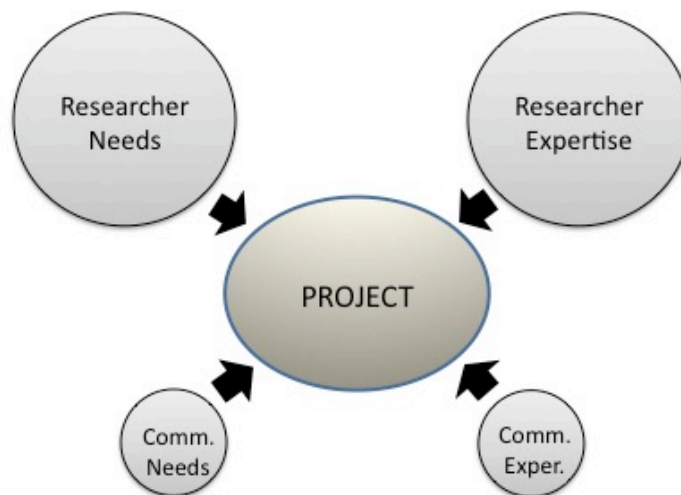
1. Are any institutions collaborating in this research? No ☐ / Yes ☐ **If yes:**

| Institution Name | Individual Contact/ Affiliate of Institution | FWA # | Local IRB Review?(Y or N) | IRB Approval Date | IRB Approval Expiration Date |
|------------------|--|-------|------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | | | | |

2. **Attach a copy of the most recent IRB or Ethics Committee approval.**

⇒ **Implication:** While certain kinds of collaboration at later stages are allowed, the system of approval is set up around *researcher* needs and expertise, as we illustrate in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Traditional View of Community Collaboration in the Research Process.



There is also a growing discourse in which ethical research is (only) that which is dictated by community interests, with researchers playing a sort of consultant role (see discussion in Bower, 2008:Section 1.2.4). This is seemingly progressive and responds to historical and contemporary power imbalances,

“[b]ut there is a flip side to linguists’ assumption that empowerment requires autonomy and self-determination: a self-conscious limiting of the role outside linguists can or should have in facilitating language revitalization” (Dobrin, 2008:302), as we illustrate in Figure 3.

² For more information, please see cphs.berkeley.edu. The specifics of the model outlined in the forms can be negotiated, but the applicant must provide a justification for departing from any given model. In this sense, the default is still one where institutionally-affiliated academic researchers maintain control.

Figure 3. When the Pendulum Swings in the Other Direction: The Researcher as a Limited Actor.



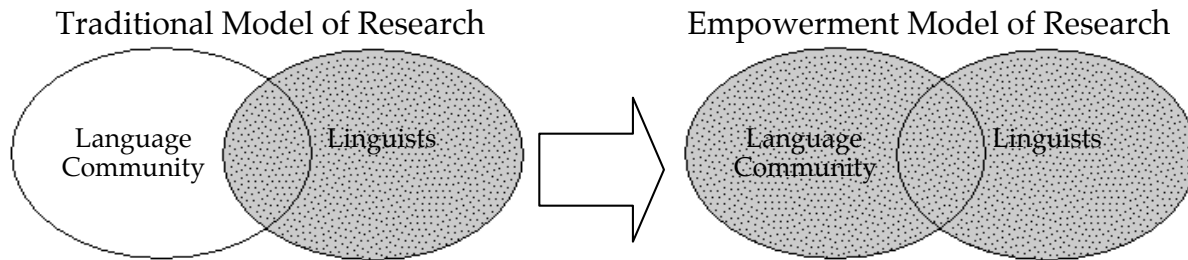
§2 – Using Collaborative Consultation At Every Stage

We propose that collaboration in linguistic fieldwork should be an important aspect of all stages of research – true collaboration does not occur as an afterthought. In this section, therefore, we examine the notion of collaboration in one of the first and most basic aspects of linguistic fieldwork: finding (a) speaker(s) to work with. We present a model of research called “Collaborative Consultation”, which forms the basis for our case study in Section 3.

Figure 4. Collaborative View of All Parties’ Equal Agency in the Research Process.



- We approach collaboration using an empowerment framework of research (Cameron *et al.*, 1993; Yamada, 2007), which advocates research not *on* or *for* but rather *with* research participants. In our conception, the empowerment model expands the community of people who have relevant input on research to include all who have special interest in the stated field (here, the target language) as we illustrate in Figure 5:

Figure 5. Implementing the Empowerment Model

To implement the empowerment model, we propose **collaborative consultation**. In the frame of linguistic field research, collaborative consultation refers to any kind of open interview in which the initial investigator's theoretical and other goals are explicit and continually reframed and revised by **all** research participants – i.e., including those traditionally defined separately as “researcher” and “subject”.

§3 – Approaching True Collaboration: A Case Study

Why is speakerhood a good case study?

3.1 At Issue: Traditional Practices to Determine Speakerhood ...

... Are Vague

- Davies (2003) notes that the term “native speaker” seems to be negatively defined – that is, it is conceptualized as a lack of malfunction instead of something positive.
- In our previous case study of reported (native) speakerhood in studies of Mandarin (Haynes & Leonard, 2007:3), we found that only 52% (n=31) of theoretically-oriented linguistics publications reported that subjects were “native speakers”.³ Conversely, in studies of endangered languages, there is a strong emphasis on identifying a good speaker – e.g., Chelliah (2001), Dimmendaal (2001), and Everett (2001) discuss the need to find a good speaker, but give little information about how this is to be done.

... Or Unilateral

- Very few linguistic studies state how speakerhood was determined, leaving us to assume that this was a unilateral decision by the researcher(s).⁴
- A former consultant wonders in McLaughlin & Sall (2001:207) why he was not asked to consult in Wolof, a language known to him since childhood. He says, “When I was a small child I spoke Pulaar and Seereer better than Wolof, but even then, I cannot remember ever not having known Wolof.”

³ We conducted a mini corpus investigation in the *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA)* database (www.csa.com/factsheets/llba-set-c.php), which covers major subfields of linguistics. 61 results were returned for a 2006 keyword search for “Mandarin”, of which 42 studies were available to us for examination. Eleven of these studies encompassed topics for which speakerhood was deemed irrelevant for our purposes (e.g., studies of language policy).

⁴ In our 2007 study of publications on Mandarin, only 16% even gave any indication of how they determined “nativeness”, a prominent pattern in linguistics research.

- Worst: A “linguist-knows-best” stance, in which speakers are purely subjects of study and only linguists can determine their qualifications
 - For example, Mufwene (1993) relies on his community contact to introduce him to Gullah speakers, but does not trust this person’s choices.

Furthermore, the sociocultural context of language endangerment complicates the notion of speakerhood in that it often entails special prestige or stigma associated with speaking a given language (Evans, 2001), hence making the issue even more critical for a fieldwork context.

3.2 Implementing the Philosophy Underlying Our Model

For purposes of illustrating our model, we report on the following two pilot collaborative consultations on determining speakerhood with:

- Myra Johnson (MJ), Director of the Warm Springs, OR Language Program
- Daryl Baldwin (DB), Director of the Myaamia Project at Miami University (see www.myaamiaproject.org), and Karen Baldwin (KB), Miami language learner, teacher, and curriculum developer

Using the question of what constitutes a good speaker as a basis, we all explored larger principles involved in framing such a question.

3.3 Our Specific Collaborative Consultations and Their Implications

Information about our collaborations:

- These discussions emerged from ongoing dialogue about issues in linguistic field research.
- Conversations were two-sided; the authors of this paper reject the notion of the “uninvolved researcher”.
- The authors of this paper approached the conversations having particular questions in mind with the idea that the questions could be expanded and/or altered in the course of the consultations.
- The quotations that follow are from initial conversations in late 2006.

3.3.1 Regarding the Question of the Right to Determine Speakerhood

MJ: It’s strange that we would leave it up to linguists to define who’s a fluent speaker. ... When I first came to work for the tribes in the language program, the linguists were determining who was fluent. And I thought, in my mind, there’s nobody that can determine the fluency of people, other than the people themselves. And it shouldn’t be anybody else.

DB: I just never felt comfortable to think that it was my place to question whether someone was a speaker. If they, they felt they were a speaker, if they had knowledge to share about that language, then they were a speaker of that language.

MJ: I don’t think there’s a real actual written or theoretical or scientific way of saying, “This is exactly how you speak this language.” ... So I don’t think you can ever, there would ever come a time when a linguist could say, “This is all right.”

- ⇒ **Implication: Linguists and other specialists are not omnipotent, and the initial research instigator should always seek wider community input, where “community” refers to the entire group of people with interest in the topic. For example, within Oklahoma Miami language and culture research, the norm is to seek out and involve any relevant parties.**

3.3.2 Regarding the Issue of Determining Who is a Speaker

MJ: If I were to use my personal judgment, it would be based on the fact that someone ... who has continually used her language, who grew up with it, who spoke to the elders ... in the language, she learned how to orate, or how to talk the language that adults speak, and so she's, I would consider her fully fluent.

[later in discussion]

MJ: If [the speakers were] talking broken, then the linguist would say, “Oh, you're not fluent.” And I don't think that should be their place. If they speak a broken Native American language, then maybe that's how they learned it, and I think that's justifiable for them, still being fluent. It shouldn't be somebody else's call to say they're not.

DB: I never really questioned necessarily whether they [potential “speakers”] could hold extended conversation – random conversation – in the language ... most importantly to me is that they knew what they were saying; they were able to explain what they were saying with some cultural context.

- ⇒ **Implication: Speakerhood may be conceptualized in unique ways depending on cultural norms, and an understanding for determining who is a speaker must be arrived at collaboratively in many cases. For example, in Warm Springs, the researcher is not automatically empowered to make such determinations.**

3.3.3 Conclusion: Approaching Research From a Collaborative Standpoint

MJ: Linguists shouldn't march in. They really need to be able to be quiet, sit and listen and be able to gain the knowledge of the people, and understand them first. ... And that doesn't mean that all tribes have the same cultural sensitivities or cultural norms, you know, so it's different in every community.

DB: ... sitting by the creekbed fishing one Sunday afternoon might reveal important ideas about the way things are in a particular community, which would I think make sense later when it comes to documenting or working with a particular group or language. ... Linguistics is still very much “get data, bring it back, bluh bluh bluh bluh bluh”.

DB: [Researchers] should set their judgments aside and acknowledge within themselves why they're doing the work in the first place. And if they can go into a community and let whatever level of language and culture exist and be what it is, and give it credibility and ... respect whatever the community determines is what they deem to be their language, their culture ...

KB: My theory is, all the time, is to just listen. To just go in and listen and ... just pay attention.

DB: [in response to a comment by WL on “collaborative consultation”] It’s a good question for the community. [The researcher might initially say] “This is work I’m interested in. I’m here. What do you want from this work? Or do you ...” Maybe they don’t know, but it’s certainly a question that’s worth asking because the simple question alone would I think set the stage for more of the equal reciprocal sort of relationship to occur.

Figure 6. A Complete Model of Collaborative Fieldwork.



§4 – Broader Implications

1.) True collaboration is about “sharing knowledge” (e.g., theoretical background, assumptions, and analyses), not “sharing information” (i.e., results) (Smith, 1999:16).

2.) Collaboration should occur from the very initial stages of research and should entail equal agency from all parties about the research process (not necessarily the research outcomes).

3.) Some research, especially long-term fieldwork, requires a broad interpretation of the Belmont “Respect for Persons” principle rather than a traditional, narrow interpretation.

4.) This demands a reanalysis of what are considered best practices in academia. Given the practical restrictions of academic research – particularly timelines and expectations for productivity as established by research institutions – truly collaborative collaboration, in which all parties participate in research decisions, may appear daunting. We call for a shift in the way research is approached so that collaborative consultation is itself a best practice, where funding, academic advancement, and job promotions are framed accordingly.

5.) Collaboration is a **philosophy** and **approach** rather than a set of guidelines about research roles and outcomes.

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